

## ON THE CRYPTS AT HEXHAM AND RIPON.<sup>1</sup>

By J. T. MICKLETHWAITE, F.S.A.

Before the year 678 St. Wilfrid had built churches at Hexham and at Ripon, famous in that day and since. And it would be interesting, if possible, to shew that the churches in these towns still contain something which can be ascribed to so early a date. Now it happens that each of them possesses a crypt evidently of great antiquity, and these crypts are so like one another, and different from what we find elsewhere, that they must almost certainly have been built at the same time and under the same direction, if not by the same hands; and at no time is this so likely to have happened as when both churches were under the care of Wilfrid himself. There is, therefore, good *prima facie* reason for thinking that the crypts belong to his time. But on the other hand we have the distinct statement of Leland that the "old abbey" of Ripon stood on a different site from the "new minstre."

The late Mr. Walbran, of Ripon, was the first to call attention to the resemblance between these crypts, and he has given excellent descriptions of them, with many valuable observations, in a paper in the York volume of this Institute, in his own Ripon guide, and in the preface to the first volume of the Surtees Society's "Hexham." He accepted Leland's statement as conclusive with respect to the sites at Ripon, but was so convinced that the existing crypt is of Wilfrid's work that he supposed him to have built *two* churches there. A simpler hypothesis seems to be that Leland was mistaken, or that what he wrote has been misunderstood. And I hope before I have done to point out how the tradition which he has preserved may be taken so as to agree with what seem to be the facts of the case. But first let us examine the crypts themselves, and see if we can find anything about them which may give a clue to their date.

<sup>1</sup> Read in the Section of Antiquities at the Carlisle Meeting, August 3rd, 1882.

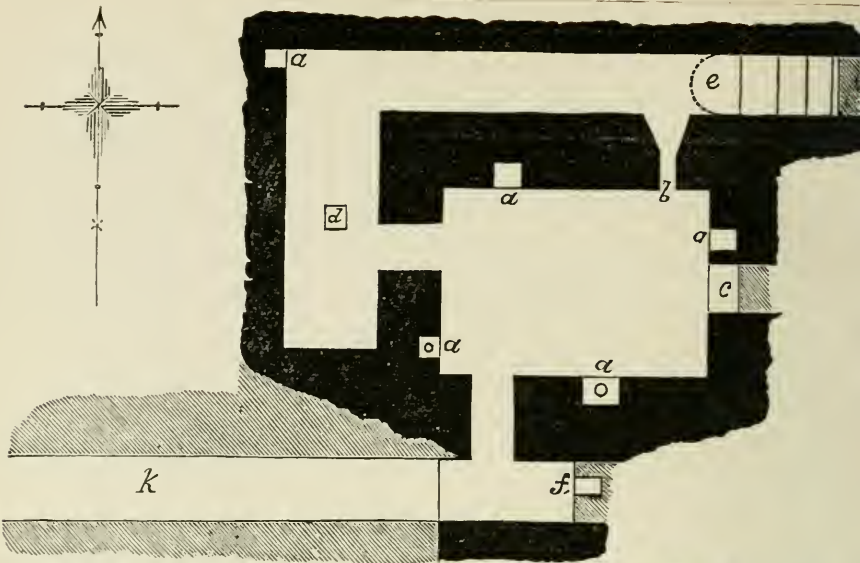
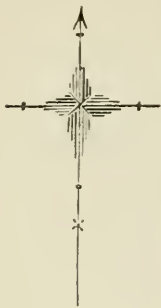
It will be allowed that they are earlier than the introduction of what we call the Norman style. But how much earlier is a more difficult question. We do not yet know enough of the history of English church architecture for the four centuries and a half of its existence which preceded the Norman conquest to be able to give a date to each example, as we can to those of the corresponding period, which came after it. Men talk of the "Saxon times" as if they were all as one, quite forgetting that from the landing of Augustine to the death of the Confessor was as long as from the Battle of Agincourt to the present day, and that the changes which took place in England during the first period were not less important than those during the last. There must in so long and eventful a time have been some changes in architectural style, and it may be that by further study of what is left we may some day learn what they were. But we do not know them now, and are fain to class together all works which range from the seventh century to the eleventh.

Architecture failing, let us see whether ecclesiology can help us? Crypts of the twelfth century and later are not uncommon, but are, I think, seldom found except in churches which can trace their existence to before the conquest. The post conquest crypts are often very large, and differ in many ways from the earlier ones, but they are a tradition from them, and the ultimate source from which they are derived is the *confessio* of the Italian basilica. Now in the earliest years of the English church two rival parties contended for supremacy within her; the Italian party originating in the Roman mission, and the Celtic, or as it was then called, the Scottish party. The Italians obtained a nominal triumph at the Synod of Streonshalch, or Whitby, in 664, but the Scottish influence remained strong, and it had a large share in the formation of the traditions of our national church. In a paper which I had the honour of reading before this Institute at Lincoln two years ago<sup>1</sup> I tried to

<sup>1</sup> *On the Growth of English Parish Churches*, printed in the *Archæological Journal*, vol. xxxvii., p. 364, &c. Since that paper was written I have become convinced that the pure basilican form

of church building soon went out of use in England, and that what I have called the *miscel* type of plan was used at least after the Danish invasions for both Abbey and Cathedral Churches.

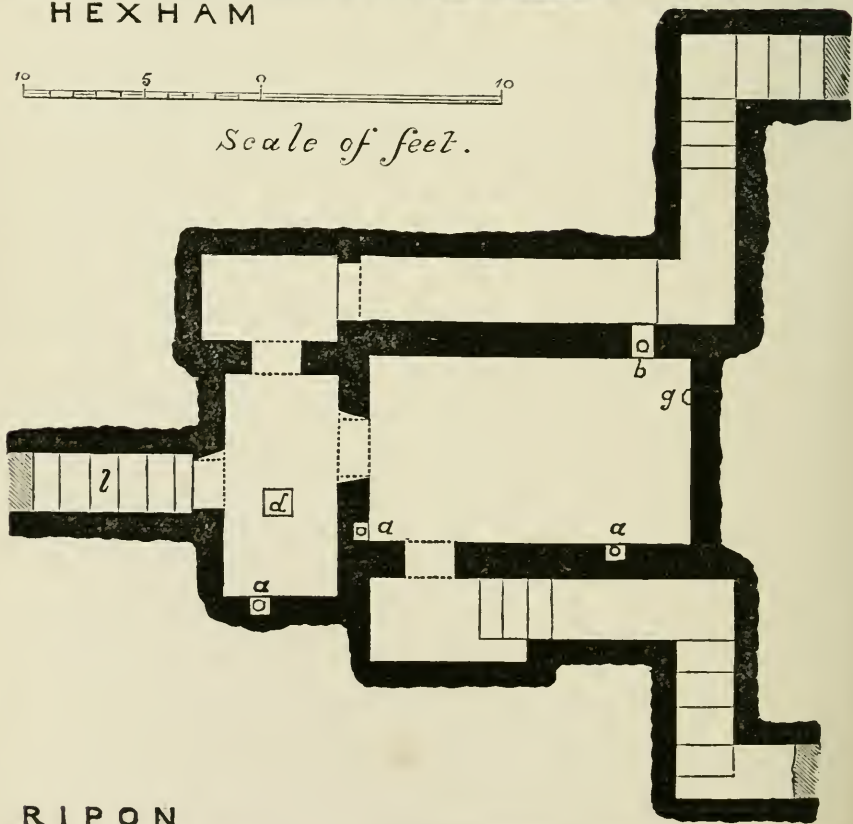




HEXHAM



*Scale of feet.*



RIPON

shew that each of these great parties had its own type of building, which became the patterns respectively of the regular and the secular churches. Wilfrid, the founder and builder of the churches at Hexham and Ripon, was a strong partizan on the Italian side, and we should have expected that he would have built accordingly, even if we had not been expressly told so. His churches were in the Roman manner, and that at Hexham was a notable example of it. There was not its like north of the Alps—*Neque ullam domus aliam citra Alpes montes talem edificatam audivimus* says the contemporary Eddi.

Now let us turn to the remains themselves, and see how far they agree with anything we should expect to find in churches built after the Roman manner. It is sufficient to refer to what Mr. Walbran has written for minute descriptions of the crypts themselves; but I give plans of them drawn to the same scale, by which they may be readily compared;<sup>1</sup> and I borrow from Mr. Walbran this summary of their resemblances and differences,<sup>2</sup> altering a few words to avoid the confusion of two systems of naming.

“The central chamber at Hexham is rather larger than that at Ripon, measuring 13 feet 4 inches by 8 feet, against 11 feet 3 inches by 7 feet 9 inches. It is also placed much deeper in the ground. In the one, the cells at the west ends of the flanking passages have triangular roofs; in the other, the cells are not defined from the passages by arches, and are covered with flat stones. At Hexham, the western chamber has a barrel vault; at Ripon, a semi-vault only. At Hexham, the heads of the niches are flat, and there are none in the eastern wall; at Ripon, they have semicircular heads, and there is one on the north side of the east wall, and another larger one

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted for the Hexham plan in the first place to my good friend, Mr. R. J. Johnson of Newcastle, who has charge of the church professionally; but I have also had the use of the plate of the crypt from Mr. C. C. Hodges's forthcoming book of measured drawings of the church. The Ripon plan is taken from Mr. Walbran's, with some additions noted on the spot. The references on these plans are as follows:  
*a a* Lamp niches.

*b b* Lamp niches with backs pierced to the passage behind.

*c* Window into crypt blocked up.

*d d* Square holes in vault for ventilation.

*e* Opening for headway of original stairs

*f* Stopping of passage with a lamp niche in it.

*g* Inserted bracket.

*k* Later passage of entrance.

*l* Stair inserted between earlier walls.

<sup>2</sup> See Raine's *Hexham Priory* (Surtees Society), vol. ii., p. xxiv. of the Introduction.

higher up in the middle of the same wall. But both crypts have obviously proceeded from a common type, although the idea is more elaborated at Hexham than at Ripon. Both central chambers have their entrances in the same positions. In both the semi-circular heads of the doorways, which are of the same height—6 feet 3 inches—are cut out of horizontal slabs. The passages in each agree in width within an inch. Both have funnel-like apertures in the heads of the niches, and deep round basins in the bases. In each the north-east niche is pierced through to the passage behind. Each has a small rectangular opening in the roof of the western chamber, which may have been connected by a flue with the floor of the church above; and both have been plastered throughout.”

To this I must add that the flanking passages rise eastwards; and both of them at Hexham, and the northern one at Ripon end in stairs upwards. The last has overhead what appears to be the opening in the floor of the seventh century church, by which it was originally entered. A little digging here would probably lead to interesting results. It is possible that the southern passage once went on eastwards like the other, although it is now stopped by masonry with a lamp niche in it, which seems to be of early date. This passage is continued westwards for some distance, and after turning south, ends in a stair up to the nave. This is certainly a late extension, for there is a thirteenth century gravestone used up in its roof. It probably dates from the later middle ages, when people used to make offerings at “St. Wilfrid nedel in the crowdes.” There is a western stair also at Hexham, where it rises direct from the western chamber. I suspect that this also is an addition; but Mr. Hodges, who has studied the place very closely, believes it to be of the same date as the rest.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since this was written I have seen the Hexham crypt which I had not before. The steps are certainly added, but the entrance to them from the western chamber, and the walls at the sides to the height of about six feet are of the original work. It appears, therefore, that there was a cell running westwards from the western chamber and roofed over with

stone like the passages; and that in later times the roof has been taken away, the side walls carried up, and the stair inserted. The cell was perhaps intended to receive a tomb, and the stair was put there, like the western passage at Ripon, because the eastern approaches interfered inconveniently with the arrangements of the church built above in later times.

The *confessio* of an early Italian basilica, such as Wilfrid took for his model, consists of a chamber containing relics under the high altar, either with or without an opening or window to the church on the side towards the people, and a passage running round its other sides and entered by steps at each end, either directly from the choir of the singers or from the aisles or transept, as the case may be. Now if we look at our Hexham and Ripon plans, fixing our attention upon those points in which they agree, we shall see that, except for an interruption of the surrounding passage, in each case at the south-west corner; this is exactly what we have got there. But—and here is the fact which is specially important as regards the date of the work—the passages and stairs of approach come from the *east*. The churches to which these crypts belonged had, therefore, their high altars at the *west* ends.

The western position of the altar is of very early date, so early indeed, that it has been doubted whether it was ever used here in English times except at Canterbury,<sup>1</sup> where it remained from the old *Roman* church which Augustine found and repaired. And even there, although the altar itself stood, with the bishop's chair in the apse behind it to tell of its former dignity, until the fire in 1067, it had long before given place to a newer high altar in a choir built towards the east. Brixworth, founded in 680, and the most perfect basilican church we have remaining in England, has its altar towards the east; so that in Wilfrid's own time, and in churches built like his in the Roman manner, the present English custom was already in use. In these two churches, however, it is certain that the altars were at the west; and as no important works seem to have been done at either of them between the seventh century and the twelfth; and even if there had been, it is impossible to believe that the orientation would be changed from the general to the exceptional direction, we are driven to the conclusion that the crypts belong to the first foundation, and they, therefore, claim our interest, not only on account of their venerable age, which has now passed the twelfth century, but as personal relics of a very remarkable man.

The "old abbay" at Ripon, which Leland mentions, if

<sup>1</sup> The old conventual church at Lyminge seems to be another example of the same sort.

it had any existence at all except in the imagination of his informants, may have been the site of that "Scottish" establishment which was displaced when Ripon was given to Wilfrid. If he built his church on a new site, and a chapel remained on the old one, it is quite possible that the name of "the old abbey" may, with the help of the greater appearance of antiquity in the chapel than in the often rebuilt minster, have continued even till the sixteenth century.

Having now, as I think, fixed the date and purpose of these crypts, let us before leaving them consider some of their details. Although the central chambers, and those next west of them, are about the same size in the two examples, the original passages of entrance spread out widely at Hexham and keep close to the main walls at Ripon. This clearly points to some difference in the form of the churches to which the crypts respectively belonged. We have descriptions of the church at Hexham by the contemporary Eddi and the twelfth century Prior Richard, who saw its remains. Canon Raine has printed both in the first volume of his *Hexham Priory*. They are rather obscure, but seem to describe a basilican church with aisles and galleries, and mention is made of underground works, that is, of our crypt. All writers who mention the church extol its great size and magnificence. Now, size is but by comparison, and it might well be that to men accustomed to the little cell-like churches of the "Scottish" tradition a basilican church of the Italian type might seem immense, although its actual dimensions were very moderate. But we have good reason to believe that those of the Hexham church were really very considerable. Enough remains of the almost contemporary church at Brixworth to shew that it was of good size, and as that was not a church of the first class, and the historians who mention it do not wax eloquent upon its bigness, we may justly infer that one which did so excite their admiration was very considerably larger.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the ruins of it which remained in the twelfth century, which was

<sup>1</sup> The clear width of the nave at Brixworth is thirty feet, and if the entrances to the crypts were in like positions in

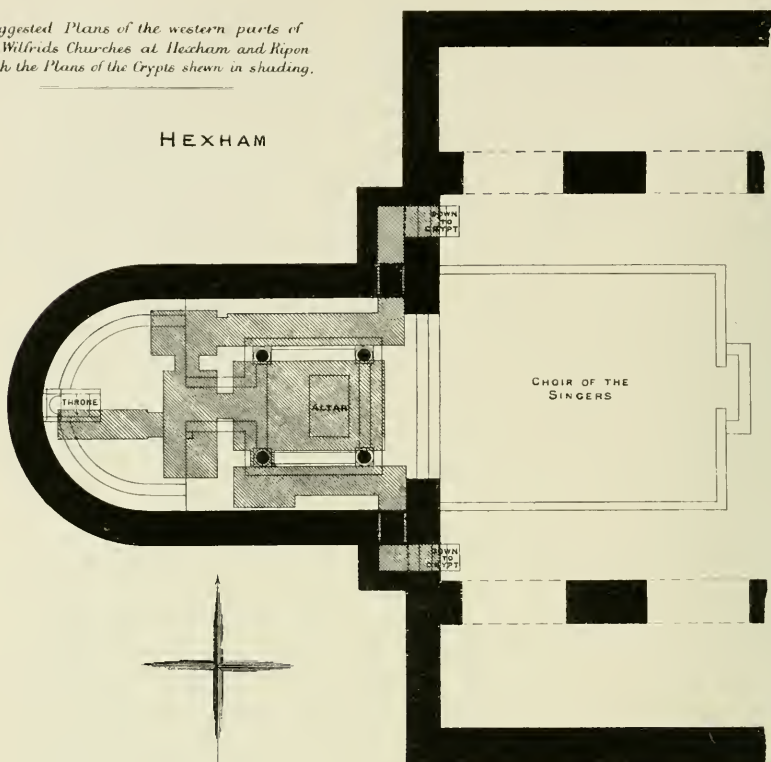
both churches that of Hexham can not have been less than thirty-two feet.



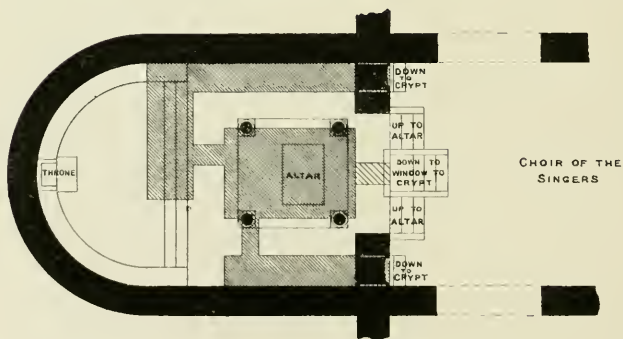


*Suggested Plans of the western parts of  
St. Wilfrids Churches at Hexham and Ripon  
with the Plans of the Crypts shewn in shading.*

HEXHAM



RIPON



*Scale of Feet*

not a time of small buildings, were large enough to call forth the praises of Prior Richard.

The church at Hexham then was a basilica of good size with aisles, and perhaps with a broad transept between the nave and the apse, and the entrances to the crypt were wide apart so as to come outside the enclosing walls of the choir of the singers, just as we find them to have done at Brixworth. But we are not told that the church of Ripon was large, and we find that there the stairs (or stair if there was only one) have gone down straight from the choir of the singers itself. I have attempted in the plans opposite to shew how churches of the basilican type can be fitted on to the crypts. The deep presbytery of much more than a semicircle agrees with what we find at Brixworth and other very early churches in England.

Both crypts have niches in the walls, with cups or cressets for lights at the bottoms of them and funnels to intercept the soot at the tops, shewing us the early use of this simple method of lighting, which was kept up at least in the conservative abbeys till the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The piercing of the back of the north-east niche into the passage beyond can not be accidental, as it is found in both crypts, but I cannot offer any explanation of it.<sup>2</sup> The hole in the vault of the western chamber in each crypt was probably for ventilation, as Mr. Walbran suggested. Like ventilators were found in the curious crypt of St. Philbert de Grand Lieu, described and figured by Sir Henry Dryden in the first volume of the *Sacristy*.

What Mr. Walbran called the large niche at the east end of the Ripon crypt is really the opening or window, through which people in the church could by descending a few steps look into the *confessio*. There is no corresponding opening at Hexham, perhaps on account of the greater depth of the crypt. That at Ripon was opened out a short time ago, when those engaged in the erection of a new organ began to alter the old vault to fit it for the reception of some of their machinery. This was very properly stopped, but enough had been done to enable

<sup>1</sup> See *Rites of Durham Abbey*, Surtees Society's edition, pp. 19 and 72.

<sup>2</sup> This piercing at Ripon forms the well known *St. Wilfrid's Needle*.

our member, the Rev. W. C. Lukis, F.S.A., to examine the outside of the east end wall, and in a letter to me he says that it "was so irregular, some of the stones projecting far beyond others, that there can be no doubt whatever that it was never intended to be seen." Now this is the description of a wall from which the facing stones have been removed. The fair face towards the original church afforded good ashlar stones, which could be used again, so they were taken away by those who had the altering of the church into its later shape, of which the *confessio* formed no part.

In each crypt the surrounding passage is interrupted at the south-west corner; and doorways are so placed that anyone entering by one stair and leaving by the other must pass through the west end of the central chamber. This was no doubt for the convenience of persons visiting the relics deposited there, but I do not know of any other example with the same arrangement.

I have spoken of the Ripon crypt as though it had a stair towards the east on each side, as I believe it originally had. But the southern passage is, as I said just now, stopped by masonry which does not appear to be far removed in date from the rest. Now, such an alteration, if it has been made at all, must have been made for some reason, and it is just possible that one stair having been found sufficient for convenience, the other was removed in order to provide an honourable place of burial for the founder, who, as Bede<sup>1</sup> tells us, was buried at Ripon nigh the altar on the south side, *juxta altare ad austrum*, which would exactly describe this spot; and if this were so, it may be that the body of Saint Wilfrid, which both Ripon and Canterbury claimed to possess, still rests undisturbed where it was laid by his friends nearly twelve hundred years ago.

<sup>1</sup> *Ecl. Hist.*, liv, c. 12.